

Homily at St. John of the Wilderness Church
January 2, 2022
Jeremiah 31:7-14, Psalm 84:1-8, Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a, Luke 2:41-52
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Even before we left for Spain to hike the 500 mile Camino de Santiago a little over 2 years ago, we were supported by the kindness of many. The Cathedral in Wyoming threw a retirement party for us when we left and gathered much of the money we would need to make the trip. Our neighbor drove us to the bus stop so we wouldn't have to take a cab in the early morning hours the day we left. Our new church in Bellingham, Washington had us come up for special prayers and a laying on of hands the Sunday before we embarked on this journey. So much love, kindness, and support - it was a great way to begin!

I kept small squares of origami paper neatly tucked in our guide book just inside the main compartment of my backpack. Despite the added weight, they were an important component of our trip. For part of what we sought on this pilgrimage was whether or not we would see or notice Christ in others on the trail. And our plan was to fold a small origami crane and present it to those who we saw exhibit care to us or to others. We tried to stay focused on kindness. And probably because we were so focused, we saw kindness everywhere. And we did fold many origami cranes during the 40 days we hiked.

I thought of our long pilgrimage hike to Santiago when I read the gospel lesson today. It is about Joseph, Mary, and young Jesus making the trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover. The distance between these two places is about 65 miles - an easy hour's drive for us - but a 4-7 day hiking trip for them. It must have been an exciting time traveling with relatives and friends - a homecoming of sorts with the sharing stories, meals, and places to camp for the night. My guess is that it might have been much like the Camino, where you might walk and talk and eat supper with one group of fellow travelers and then not see them for awhile only to reunited a few days later further down the trail.

And that was probably in the minds of Mary and Joseph as they walked along on the way home. Jesus wasn't with them, but most likely was walking and playing with his friends up ahead. But after a day into the trip, they thought it odd that they hadn't seen him at all, so they turned and hiked all the way back to Jerusalem and searched for him for three days. Where did they find him but in the temple, discussing religion with the teachers of the Torah.

This story in Luke shows a young Jesus not only on a journey to Jerusalem to celebrate God's saving act of releasing the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt,

the Passover, but, at the same time, was on a spiritual pilgrimage of his own.

This trip seems to be a turning point in his life from boyhood to young adulthood, where his own path and ministry were becoming more focused. He said to his parents, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

It was through the kind mentoring of the religious teachers in the temple that Jesus was able to learn - not only more about the Torah (although, actually, he seemed to know quite a bit already...), but also about who he was and whose he was. During his childhood there were moments of Epiphany when others, like Simeon and the angel Gabriel, and the wise men recognized Jesus as extraordinary. But in this story, he, for the first time, was able to claim this for himself. “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

Searching for self awareness, who I am and whose I am, was a common quest on the Camino. One young man with whom we walked for a bit from Germany had a list of self discovery type questions and focused on one each day as he walked. One day I gave a small bag of ice to another pilgrim who was having problems with his knees.

Although he took the ice and thanked me, in broken English he asked me why I would do this for him. Why would I do this for him? The question puzzled me.

Was he questioning my motivation to help or his own worthiness to accept help? Was it because I was a woman or an American? But we are called, as children of God, love God and our neighbors and therefore, to help those in need and accept help when needed? I will never know how that bag of ice ultimately affected him, but isn't that part of an act of kindness - we do what we can to make the world a better place and trust that good will come of it.

There is another journey, actually two, discussed in our reading today in the book of Jeremiah. A crushing blow happened to Judah in 587 BCE. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and many people were killed or were forced into exile in Babylon. Not only did they lose their livelihood, their God given land, but their temple was gone and they were under the rule of foreigners. Their reality seemed hopeless. Those forced to hike to Babylon were not doing this for exercise, fellowship, or self discovery, but because they were a defeated people being taken captive. Perhaps they felt much like the Native Americans on their forced march to Oklahoma years ago on the Trail of Tears.

But Jeremiah, the prophet, in the midst of a hopeless people, wasn't.

His conviction that God would never give up on God's people and that the divine love was everlasting, led him to remind his people of this - even as reality, at that

moment, looked quite different. He writes about God bringing God's people back home, "With weeping they shall come and with consolations I (God) will lead them back."

Jeremiah had been warning the people for quite a while about serious trouble to come and when it finally did arrive, he could have just said to them, "I told you so." But he didn't. His words of hope and consolation regarding a second chance - a journey back home certainly were God's words to the people, but it took a loving, caring and kind prophet to speak them.

On the Camino there are many signs either in the shape of scallop shells or simple yellow arrows that guide pilgrims on their journey. And most everyone carries a small guidebook with maps for each day of the route. There were fellow travelers with whom one could discuss the path ahead and plan for the next day.

But we found another group of folks who helped keep us going in the correct direction - the Spaniards themselves. They might have been tilling their fields, hanging clothes outside, or cooking a meal, but they were also watching us. They would run from their homes if they saw someone take a wrong turn, point their

finger in the correct direction and say, “Camino”. Their kindness and care helped keep us on the path and we knew that they were there to support us.

As we enter a new year, this might be a good time to think about where God calls us to journey and continue to look for ways to support others with love and care and kindness along their own paths and journeys. Much like Jeremiah who encouraged his people as he spoke of a future filled with hope and like the teachers of Torah in the Temple who took time for a young boy with a divine parentage.

Now driving us to a bus stop on the way to the Camino or giving us money for the trip or even giving a bag of ice to a young man with hurting knees are like small dots of kindness. But when we add these to the kindness done by you, and you, and you, then it grows and we begin to see kindness as the norm in our society instead of the exception. And wouldn't a society filled with kindness, indeed, make the world a better place.

Have a great journey this year. Buen Camino!